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At Easter, we go from blindness to deep, clear sight

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Now we have completed three weeks of the season of Lent, a season that began on Ash Wednesday when we were signed with those ashes that reminded us that we are dust, and from dust we came, to dust we shall return. We began then a season of renewal to prepare for our passage from death to new, everlasting life. Our preparation included, as we know, some fasting or penance, disciplining ourselves to put into a right perspective all the goods of the earth that we cherish so much.

We encourage or encouraged and began to do almsgiving -- giving of that excess that we have to those who are in desperate need, sharing of the goods we have so all could have a full life -- and prayer. Those three things always mark the season of Lent, and I trust that we have been trying to be more alert to doing penance, disciplining ourselves in the right view so the world's goods we've been sharing with others, and praying.

This Sunday with this Gospel lesson really kind of changes our focus now to anticipation to Easter -- the moment of the resurrection of Jesus that becomes the time for us to enter into new life with Jesus, his risen life, to share that life as sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus. This Gospel lesson today prepares us for this anticipation of Easter where we renew our baptismal promises, especially Holy Saturday night, but Easter Sunday, too.

Fourth Sunday of Lent

1 Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a

Psalms 23:1-3a, 3b-4, 5, 6

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

Full text of the readings

But the Easter vigil where baptisms take place, people begin to share for the first time this risen life of Jesus. Of course, water is a very important part of it. People are baptized with the water, and then, as happened to the man in the Gospel lesson, that water gives them new life but also a new sight. They begin to move from blindness to sight, from darkness to light, because they're sharing them, as we all do who have been baptized in Jesus, who is the light of the world.

But as we hear from the Gospel lesson, this enlightenment that Jesus brings to us is something that can

be -- and will be, I think, for all of us -- gradual until we get a deeper and deeper sight, insight, into who Jesus is. Our first lesson today shows us one of the things we have to be aware of as we prepare to see with the new light of Jesus.

Our first lesson reminds us in a very clear way, a dramatic way, that seeing with God's sight -- that is, seeing with the eyes of faith -- is going to be different from what would be our normal human sight, seeing with our human eyes. It's clear when Samuel comes to anoint the one who is going to be the new king of the chosen people to take the place of Saul, and Samuel looks at Eliab, the older, and thought, "This must be Yahweh's anointed." But Yahweh told Samuel, "Do not judge by his looks or his stature, for he is not the one."

Key words: God does not judge as humans judge. Humans see with the eyes, God sees the heart. So finally, then, after going through all the sons and rejecting all of those who appear to be the one, God chooses David, the least, the one whose father, Jesse, did not even think was necessary to bring him forward. Yet that's the one that God chooses. "Go anoint him, for he is the one."

The lesson again is so clear: God sees the ways that we do not see, and through enlightenment of baptism, we begin to see with the eyes of God. We begin to get the insight of faith, and in a very dramatic way, this happens to the man in the Gospel. The Gospel dramatizes how he moves from not knowing who this man is that healed him. He just did what he had been told and now ... he had been blind even from birth, now he sees.

And others, his neighbors and all the people, wondered, "Is this really the beggar who used to sit here?" Some said, "He is the one," others said, "No, but he looks like him." But then the man says, "I am he; this happened to me. I went from being blind from birth to being able to see." He was asked, "Well, who did it?" He said, "The man called Jesus made that mud paste, put it on my eyes, and told me to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. I did it and now I see."

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They asked him, "Well, where is this Jesus?" He said, "I don't know right now," and so then the people bring him to the religious leaders and of course, as we heard in the Gospel lesson, they challenge him: "How did you recover your sight?" He tells them. So then they said, "No, that can't be, because this man did this work on the Sabbath day and therefore, he's a sinner. How can a sinner perform such miraculous signs?" So then they asked him, "Well, what do you think of this man who did this for you?"

At this point now, the man who was blind has deeper sight. He is a prophet, one who speaks for God. But then the religious leaders refused to believe the man and go to try to get his parents to speak for him. They say, "No," because they're afraid they'll be thrown out of the synagogue. So then a second time, the Pharisees, the religious leaders, call the man who had been blind and said to him, "Tell us the truth. We know that this man is a sinner," and the man says, "I don't know whether he's a sinner or not. I only know [the] facts. I only know that I was blind, now I see."

Then he has to tell them again: "I've already told you that he put this paste on my eyes, told me to go and wash in the pool. I did, and now I see." At this point, the leaders insult him, reject him, throw him out of the synagogue. "We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this man, we don't know where he comes from." The man who had been born blind just says, "It's amazing you don't know where the man comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God doesn't listen to sinners, but if anyone honors God and does God's will, God listens to that one. If this man were not from God, he could not do what he did."

Then they expel him. Jesus heard that they had expelled him, and he goes and he looks for the man. A beautiful insight into God, as Jesus shows God to us. He goes and looks for the man who has been expelled. Then at this point, Jesus asks him a question, not about his physical sight, but his spirit sight: "Do you believe in the son of man?" The man said, "Well, who is he that I may believe?"

Jesus said, "You have seen him; he is speaking to you." "You have seen him" -- physically now, he has seen Jesus. But then the man says, "Lord, I believe," and he worshipped him. So the man now has that insight of faith. Jesus, the light of the world, has given him light. Jesus, the light of the world, has enabled him to see.

This Gospel, then, is a beautiful Gospel to prepare us to celebrate what can happen to us if we are baptized at Easter or if, for most of us, we renew our baptismal grace at the celebration of Easter. Yet in a liturgical way, we go through our baptism. We receive that washing with the water that gives us new sight, new insight, and ability to see with the eyes of faith.

But this is a challenge, and I think the challenge is kind of put forth clearly in the Gospel lesson, where Jesus said to the religious leaders when they asked, "Are we blind?" He said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty. But you say, 'We see,' and that is the proof of your sin." You claim to see, but you really reject the faith to see Jesus who he is -- son of man, son of God. So we, too, are going to be called to kind of testing our faith when we see Jesus and deepen our awareness of who Jesus is -- as son of God as well as son of Mary, son of man.

When we renew our baptismal experience -- try to deepen our awareness of who Jesus truly is as we prepare for this for Easter -- it might be helpful for us to remind ourselves of a Gospel passage that all of us are very familiar with from the 25th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus tells the parable that we all know so well-- -- the parable of the sheep and the goats -- and he separates them. Then he tells in this parable how those who have had insight -- who have seen -- he will say to them, "Come blessed of God; take possession of the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world."

Here's why: "For I was hungry, you fed me. I was thirsty, you gave me to drink. I was a stranger, you welcomed me into your house. I was naked, you clothed me. I was sick, you visited me. I was in prison, you came to see me."

You know the parable; the people in the parable say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry, give you food? Thirsty, give you something to drink? Stranger, welcomed you, or naked and clothed you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to see you?"

"Truly I say to you, whenever you did it to these little ones, the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me."

Now there's the insight of faith. Where do we see Jesus in the world around us? I hope that as we prepare for renewal of our baptismal experience at Easter and renewal of all the graces of baptism -- the sight and the insight, the light that can be given to us -- that we will be more prepared to see Jesus where Jesus says

he is. "When I was hungry" -- do we have to look very far to see who is hungry in the world around us? What are we doing? Do we really see Jesus in them, feed them?

"I was naked, you clothed me" -- same thing. Do we see Jesus and give them that extra clothing that we don't need? "Thirsty, gave me something to drink" -- do we see Jesus in those who are poor and hungry, thirsty? "Sick and you visited me in prison" -- we have a society in this country where putting people in prison has become a huge business so that we have doubled, tripled, increased the number of people in prison many times over just in the last number of years.

It's big business, and many of the people in prison are actually mentally ill, but they're treated in an extremely terrible way. Do we see Jesus in them and try to bring about prison reform? Reform of our justice system that seems to come down on the poor and, honestly if we admit, of those who are of different race than we are?

"I was homeless, you took me in" -- I'm thinking here of, do we see Jesus in all of those people in a country like Iraq, where we went to war and where we have left behind a violent, chaotic situation where people are still fleeing for their lives? Are we willing to take them in -- over 4 million people out of a population of about 25 million who are made refugees because of the war, two wars that we engaged in in Iraq?

And the same thing: Is it true now in Afghanistan? Those who have helped us; we're preparing to pull out. They know they will be threatened with violence, even with death, when the U.S. protective forces leave. Are we willing to take them in? And the answer is no.

Somehow, if we have the insight of faith -- this enlightenment that comes to us through coming to know Jesus and knowing where Jesus is -- we will struggle to change that, and the other things that the situations where Jesus is among the poorest, the least among us, the suffering among us, the people expelled from within our community. That's the insight that faith will give us if we prepare ourselves.

Right now, don't we have an extraordinary example again. ... I've said this before, but it's true now: Francis, the bishop of Rome, shows us. He goes to the poor; he goes to the imprisoned. He goes to the homeless; he goes where Jesus is. That's a beautiful example of one who has been enlightened with the light of Jesus, who sees with the eyes of faith and sees Jesus.

As we prepare for Easter now, we must deepen our prayer life especially because that's where we will come to know Jesus; know Jesus deeply. When we celebrate the renewal of our baptism, we will be prepared to receive Jesus more deeply into our lives -- into our spirit lives -- so that we will see with the eyes of Jesus, with the eyes of faith, and we will be able to minister to Jesus where he is, among the least among us: the poor, the refugees, the forgotten, the imprisoned, the sick, the homeless.

Our new, our deepened enlightenment, deeper faith, will show us how we can be like the man in the Gospel today: Go from darkness to light, from blindness to deep, clear sight -- the sight of faith.

[Homily given at St. Hilary Parish in Redford, Mich?. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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